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STRANGE TALES  
FROM HUMBLE LIFE,  
BY JOHN ASHWORTH.

A



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MARY:

A TALE OF SORROW.

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## NOTE TO THE SECOND SERIES.

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THE reader may rest assured these narratives are substantially true, as many persons now living in the neighborhood can testify. The names mentioned are real names, both of persons and places. Some of them, as in the former case, have arisen from my connection with the Chapel for the Destitute.

I am surprised and thankful for the reception given to the first eleven Tales, now constituting the First Volume—nearly half a million of which have been sold in a few months—and the urgent request of many friends that I would furnish them with more, induces me again to dip into my diary, where many more yet remain.

I am a tradesman, and make no pretensions to literary ability. If He whom I desire to serve condescends to use me as a medium of good to others, my earnest wish will be realized. To Him my prayer has been, “HOLD THOU MY RIGHT HAND.”

J. ASHWORTH.

*Rochdale, 1866.*

## Mary : a Tale of Sorrow.

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"Woman of weeping eye, sad is thy wretched lot—  
Putting on smiles, to lure the lewd passenger:  
Smiling while anguish gnaws at thy heavy heart."

"Go not astray in her paths. For she hath cast down many wounded, yes  
many ~~wrong~~ men have been slain by her. Her house is the way to hell,  
going down to the chambers of death.

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Yea, but how came she to enter these paths ?

Go with me, and I will tell you. I will show you a house that ought always to wear the sign of mourning ; for there lives a man more guilty than the Herod who slaughtered the innocents ! Th y died guiltless, and went to heaven. The mothers of Bethlehem wept their children slain. But they were children, cherubs nestling in their mothers' breasts ; and though ruthlessly torn away, their pure souls winged their flight to join those angels, who are said to be ministering spirits.

Mothers of Bethlehem ! Mothers of England ! which of you would not a thousand times sooner lay down your little child beneath a weeping willow, than have that child grow up to womanhood, to become the sport and victim of the seducer, and then a loathsome cast-off thing, the betrayed, and the double-betrayer ?

And you, mothers and daughters, especially you whose elevated position invests you with great moral power, how long will you shrink from performing a duty to yourselves, by spurning from your presence those ignoble pretenders

to be gentlemen, dressed in the height of fashion, well skilled in the etiquette and conventionalisms of good society, but who, while they may not offer the slightest insult to those in their own station of life, are well known to be guilty of conduct such as ought to brand them with infamy, and exclude them from all respectable society? Is it not time that you follow the example of your good Queen, and exclude such creatures from your social circles, your drawing-rooms, or your very acquaintance, and let them fall to their true level amongst the moral dregs of the morally degraded? Until you do this, the work of the social reformer will be painfully slow, and many poor Marys will still be the subjects of Tales of Sorrow.

Mary, the subject of this narrative, during the earlier part of her life, resided in a small village north of Rochdale. She, like most young people, was full of life, and joined her rustic playmates in their innocent amusements. As she grew up, many remarked that she would be a handsome woman. She had a pretty face, and a good figure; possessions which, to many, have proved fatal gifts. Her domestic training had not been all that one could wish. Yet her family, of which she was the youngest, had an average respectability. Mary's attendance at the chapel in the neighborhood was, for sev-

eral years, much as others. The more thoughtful of the congregation feared that she was too fond of dress, and the question was sometimes asked, how did she get the means? With an answer to this question, the painful part of our narrative begins.

At the mill where she worked, she, along with others, received her wages every fortnight. On one occasion she received a half-sovereign more than was due. She counted the money over and over, but still the money was there. She looked at the man (or rather fiend) that had paid her. He saw her confusion, and, with a smile, said, "It is all right, Mary. I know what you have received. You can keep the piece of gold for yourself." Mary returned to her work with a face like scarlet. Her flushed countenance caused several to ask her what she had been doing. She jokingly answered, "You must wait till I tell you." But though she tried to sing, and look cheerful and happy, the worm was at her heart. Thoughts to which happily, she had hitherto been a stranger, had entered her head, and, in spite of herself, troubled her. To use her own expression, "I was uneasy that day."

But what shall we say of the wretch who, by the piece of gold, had tempted this hitherto innocent girl; who had given rise to hopes he deliberately intended to blast? Well would it

have been for Mary if she had cast the piece in his face, walked out of the mill, and never again entered it.

We know that many young females fall through their own improper conduct. An excessive love of finery beyond their means, bold and forward behaviour in the presence of men, light and frivolous conversation, Sunday walks with merry companions, attending theatres and singing saloons, keeping late hours and neglecting home duties ;—all these are judged to be indications of easy virtue, and, as a rule, the judgment is just. But there is a dignity in true modesty, which renders the libertine powerless, and makes him feel his own degradation ; and however men may pretend to flatter the forward, they only admire and respect the retiring. Man's impudence is instantly rebuked where the woman's heart is fortified with true religion ; for, after all, piety is the best security for chastity.

We know one, who, finding a bunch of grapes in her cop-box (put there by the master, under pretence of looking for something) taking the grapes after him, into the counting-house, cast them down at his feet with indignation, and went home to tell her mother. She knew the man, and read his motives. Her mother wept, and exclaimed, “ Ellen, I have long thought well of you; but now I thank God that He has

given me such a child, and that He has given you so pure and noble a spirit. We are poor, but we will leave this place, and trust to Providence." Ellen is now the honored and respected wife of an honorable and respectable man. But one, in the same mill, who did not reject the allurements thrown in her way, now finds her name cast out as evil, and is the mother of a child of shame.

We have no wish to cast undue reflections, but observation leads us to the conclusion, that the moral character of the employer of labor, whether manufacturing or agricultural, is a fair criterion of the moral character of the employed. I know a mill partially owned by a man of the turf, that has in it more betters and gamblers than all the mills of the neighborhood; and another who finds money for backing foot-races, has brought many of his hands to poverty by leading them to imbibe the same spirit. "Like master, like man," often holds good, in more respects than as regards either horse or foot-racing. A high moral character in employers, managers, and overlookers, is a great blessing to the hands; and the reverse a great curse. And we are glad to say that many employers have a sincere regard for the moral condition of their hands, and take the best means to insure their welfare in this respect; for there is no doubt that vir-

tue and integrity prevail amongst our factory operatives, quite as much as amongst any class of the community.

As Mary returned home that night, she separated the half-sovereign from her wages, and hid it in a part of her dress. She looked strange, and was so unusually silent that her mother asked her if she was poorly. "No," was the reply, though she retired early to bed, but not to sleep. She was restless and miserable, and rose in the morning unrefreshed. She wished to tell some one, but durst not. She wished to hide the money, but could not tell where, for she was afraid it might be seen, and then what must she say respecting it? But soon the half-sovereign grew to two, then to three. Fine dressing followed. Whispers of scandal soon became out-spoken. She left the school and chapel; left her home, driven away by her father; and one night, in a lodging-house, became the mother of a still-born child. Mary's mother contrived to see her, privately, during her confinement, but it was a sorrowful meeting. The rest of the family would not own her, and she left the neighborhood. Where she went to, was best known to the giver of the first fatal half-sovereign.

Two years after the revelation of her shame, she might be seen walking our streets. But how

changed ! The rustic health and cheerful smile were gone. There was no mistaking what she then was, nor why she was walking the streets, — the mark was upon her. Poor Mary, does the wretch that gave thee the half-sovereign, that first beguiled, tempted, and ruined thee, smile upon thee now ? No. He has destroyed the peace of thy home, and from that home they spurned thee. He saw thee innocent and happy, and blasted all thy hopes. The scorpion's sting would not have proved so fatal to thee as that villainous wretch. Now he does not know thee : he despised thee, and threatened to send thee to prison, the last time thou didst ask for something to buy thee bread. Poor Mary !

“Once thou wert happy—thou wert once innocent,  
But the seducer beguiled thee in artlessness ;  
Then he abandoned thee unto thine infamy ;  
Now he perhaps is reclined on a soft bed of down.  
But if a wretch like him sleep in security,  
God of the red right-arm, where is Thy thunderbolt?”

Had poor Mary been wise, there was some hope still left for her.

While penning this short story, a young female has just entered my house, and sits before me. She comes to beseech me to take her, from a life of sin and sorrow, to the Home for the Penitent. A kind lady (not for the first time in such cases) consents to take her. And now the young woman, yesterday on the street, is sheltered in a home of mercy, that to many has been a home of joy, from which, after two years, they

have come forth new in heart, and new in life. The blessing of Him who had not where to lay His head rest on the homes of the benevolent Christian ladies, who have thus provided a merciful retreat for their fallen and erring sisters.

But Mary did not go ; she lived on a life of crime and wretchedness.

Late one evening a gentle knock at the door arrested my attention. The knock was evidently from a timid hand. There is in the midnight knock a disturbing influence peculiar to itself. When the tramping of feet has ceased, and the rumbling wheels of the last conveyance die away in the distance, and stillness reigns around ;—when, quiet and thoughtful, you sit gazing into the darkening embers of the worn-out fire, calmly reflecting on the past, or speculating on the future,—in such a moment a knock instantly arrests every wandering thought, and commands immediate attention. Such was my experience on the night I was requested to visit the subject of this narrative.

On unlocking the door a poor woman stood on the steps. She was without bonnet ; her head and face were covered with a shawl. Inquiring her errand at so late an hour, she informed me that a woman in the back street was very poorly, and wished to see me as soon as possible. And she, with evident fear, added, but almost in a

whisper, "She is a woman of the streets." Bidding her wait, I stepped back into the house, put on my boots, coat, and hat. On returning to the door, though the night was dark, I saw another person, standing several yards distant. She was tall and slender, and seemed clothed in white. The moment she saw me, she ran down the street at her full speed, and was instantly out of sight.

"What is the meaning of this? Why was yonder person standing, looking this way; and why does she now run so swiftly away?" I asked.

"I do not know, sir," was the reply.

"Yes, I think you do; and I wish you to tell me before I go with you one step," I observed.

"Well then, sir, she should have come for you herself; but, being dressed as she is, she wished me to come, and she would show me where you lived."

Our way to the place of infamy and suffering was down a notorious street. Near the bottom are several miserable courts. Down one of these we groped our way in absolute darkness, and at last reached the house of sin and sorrow. It was the home of Mary.

I have witnessed many scenes of wretchedness, but none surpassed the one I saw that night. In a small room, with a damp flagged floor, on a

pair of old bed-stocks, under a bundle of rags, lay the wasted and worn form of what had once been a beautiful woman. A chair without bottom stood beside her head ; across this was a narrow piece of wood, placed there to hold a cup of water. A thin candle, that stood over the fire place, dimly revealed a sight sickening to behold. I laid my hat on the floor, and, bending over the poor creature, asked if she wished to see me.

"Yes, sir, I do. Yes, I do. You went to see Ellen, and you went to see Lizzie ; they are dead ; and now my turn is come." Then raising herself up, with a look of wildness truly dreadful, she exclaimed, "But there is mercy ! there is mercy ! there must be mercy ! I know Christ died for sinners. Yes, yes, I know that Christ died for sinners, and I am a sinner ! and O ! what a sinner !"

She then fell back exhausted, and lay some time without power to speak. When she recovered, I replied, "Yes, thank God, Christ died for sinners, and for the chief of sinners. How long have you known this ?"

"Ever since I was a scholar in the Sunday-school. I there learned to read the Bible. There I heard the gospel preached. When I was about eighteen, the minister often spoke to me about joining the church, and giving my heart to God. Those were happy days, happy days !

O ! could I but call them back. But no, no, they are gone !”

And again raising her voice, she repeated, “ But there must be mercy ! There must be mercy, Christ died for sinners !”

“ Had you not left the Sunday-school, and had you sought and obtained salvation as the minister wished, how different would have been your state ! In an evil day you left the school, lost your virtue, and lost your peace.”

“ Yes, and an evil day it has been. I have a thousand reasons for cursing that day ; and to curse one villain more than the day. My blood is on his head, and my curse has long followed him. Can mercy ever reach such as he !”

Just at this point the door was softly opened, and the tall, slender young woman, in the light dress, entered. She was followed by four others, all gayly attired. The youngest, a girl about eighteen, had curled her hair, and wore a light dress, neck-beads, and bracelets. The five quietly drew near the bed, and silently gazed on poor Mary.

For some time not a word was spoken. Mary was the first to move or speak. She fixed her eyes with a steady gaze upon the group, and said, with a deep sigh, “ You WILL ALL COME TO THIS !”

I have heard the roar of the surging sea, and the wail of stricken sorrow. I have heard the

sobs of agony for the dying, and the groans of the suddenly bereaved, but that one sentence stands out amongst all as the most fearful, the most truly dreadful. Many events glide from my memory, like the lessening reverberations of the echo. But this holds its place. What a scene ! The young, the gay, the thoughtless, blooming with health, and buoyant with hope, decked in fashion and show; taking their last look at one of their companions in sin; that companion, by crime and transgression, wasted and worn, covered with filthy rags, in the most wretched poverty, sinking rapidly down to the grave, and, as she feared, down to hell ; in the calmness of death, looking on the guilty group, and deliberately predicting their doom.

We catch this sentence of the dying Magdalene, with a hope that it will never die till its sound is heard in the gayest saloon, the casino, and every house or place of ill-fame throughout our land. For to all such characters the words are true ; and terrible as true ; except they turn from their ways of wickedness, they WILL ALL COME TO THIS.

I was leaning against the wall, under the dim candle, when the fearful prophecy was uttered ; and turning to the youngest, asked if she had heard it.

“Yes,” said she, “I heard it.”

"Yes," I observed, "in this place we see the beginning and the end. This poor creature, now lying in such a pitiable condition, was once as you are. And unless you forsake the life of sin you are now leading, you will soon be as she is."

Then, addressing them all, I said, "Surely you now see, in this dying woman, what are the wages of sin. Is it not enough to make you fall on your knees, and cry for mercy and forgiveness. Enough to make you tear the very hair from your heads, at the bare thought that you have the name of ——"

While speaking, the younger girl buried her face in the neck of one near her,—she caught hold of the young creature, and they sobbed aloud. The others turned to the wall, and wept. The dying penitent calmly said, "Mr. Ashworth, kneel down; beg of God to have mercy on us all,—especially on me, a broken-hearted sinner."

We all knelt. Yes, we all knelt, and wept, and prayed. How frail are words at such a moment. My trembling voice was lost in sobs, in groans, and tears.

On a subsequent visit, Mary again referred to Ellen and Lizzie, two of her former companions. She knew I had been with them in their last moments, and wished to know if they had any hope in their death. She evidently concluded that, if they were pardoned, she, too, might possibly

be saved. I urged her not to allow anything that might admit of a question to draw her mind from the only foundation on which a sinner could trust for salvation.

One of these girls, Lizzie, a few days before she died, sent an urgent request that I would come immediately to see her. On entering the house, she requested every person but myself to go out. When all had left, she turned her face towards me with a look of despair, exclaiming, "O, sir, I have not sent for you to read the Bible, or to pray with me. It is now too late! God will not hear prayers for me. A lady brought me a Bible many months since, but I pawned it, for how could I keep a Bible, and live as I have lived? The sight of it made me miserable.. I have sent for you to confide to you a secret, for I cannot die until I have told you." With anguish of soul she communicated to me the long-kept secret but it can do no person any good to make it known. On the day she died, she begged I would not leave her one moment. About twelve at night, she had a most terrible conflict. She grasped my hand, and screamed out, "Shall I go to hell so long as I have hold of the hand of a Christian?" For some time our hands were locked together. On telling her I wished to read and pray with her once more, she loosed her fingers. One of her attendants ran out to

fetch a Bible, and another lighted a candle, for we had been some time with only the flickering of the fire for light. I read in the ears of the dying Magdalene the last portion of God's word she ever heard, from Psalm ciii.; and kneeling down, prayed for her the last prayer. As I knelt by her side she again clasped my hand, heaved one deep sigh, and breathed her last!

The other girl, Ellen Bland, died in the work-house. During her sickness she refused to see any of her former companions ; she wept and prayed night and day, and was greatly distressed on account of the disgrace she had brought on her family. Most bitterly did she bemoan her conduct to her mother. No one saw her die. The old nurse took me to look at her body, laid out in the dead-house. Her features bore the image of pain and suffering. I laid my hand on the cold forehead, and breathed a hope that the sorrow-stricken countenance did not indicate more than her last struggle with the last enemy.

I was near being the only mourner for Ellen. On the day of her funeral, I walked alone behind the hearse containing her remains, but on arriving near the cemetery, two of her young companions, gaudily dressed in borrowed black, joined me, and when Ellen's body was lowered into its dark, narrow bed, they both sincerely shed for her a tear. And thou, poor Mary, soon

followed thy frail sisters to their resting-place. Poor Mary, the wanderer from the Sunday-school; Mary, the betrayed, and the betrayer. Mary! poor Mary! Thy worn and wasted form now lies silent in a pauper's grave.

Fain would we hope that He who wiped away thy sister's tears who washed His feet turned not away from thine.

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“For at the window of my house I looked through my casement, and beheld among the simple ones a young man void of understanding. . . . In the twilight, in the evening, in the black and dark night; there met him a woman with the attire of an harlot, and with an impudent face, said unto him, I have come forth to meet thee. With her much fair speech she caused him to yield. He goeth after her as an ox goeth to the slaughter, as a fool to the correction of the stocks, as a bird to the snare, till a dart strike through his liver. . . . But he knoweth not that the dead are there, and that her gates are in the depths of hell.”

Terrible words of inspiration, and terrible retribution, for where did this impudent woman come from? Ask the rich man that, with the half-sovereign, first tempted poor MARY.

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# STRANGE TALES FROM HUMBLE LIFE.

BY JOHN ASHWORTH.

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